The Warlock's Tower

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An imaginative twist on the legendary tales of Robert E. Howard, particularly inspired by "Conan and the Tower of the Elephant," as well as the enchanting realms of the PC game Solasta: Crown of the Magister & Palace of Ice!

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Content Trigger Warnings:

Barbarism
Criminality
Poverty
Violence
Sexism
Substance Abuse

The Story Begins:

CHAPTER 1 - A Woman's Daring Proposal

In the dimly lit Forlorn Quarter, flickering torches and rare lanterns cast an eerie glow upon the raucous revelry of thieves, rogues, and those who danced on the fringes of society. Here, amidst the shadows, the outcasts could indulge in their desires, free from the judgment of the virtuous. Watchmen, well compensated with tarnished coins, turned a blind eye to the chaos unfolding in the crooked, unpaved streets, littered with refuse and stagnant puddles. Drunken laughter echoed, mingling with the sharp glint of steel lurking in the corners where the desperate and the hungry preyed on one another. The night was alive with the shrill laughter of women and the unsettling sounds of struggle, as if the very air crackled with danger and desire. The torchlight flickered against broken windows and wide-open doors, unleashing a torrent of stale wine and the pungent scent of sweat, while the clamor of tankards and fists colliding on rough-hewn tables created a cacophony of debauchery.

Within one of these dens, a northern barbarian's blood surged beneath the low, smoke-stained ceiling. It wasn't the dark sorcery of swamp hags or shadowy crones that ignited his fervor, but the exquisite allure of a woman. Fenrirson Hrothgar, a man seasoned in the company of women, found himself captivated by this enchanting figure. Yet, he recognized that her intentions were far from the simple pleasures of the flesh; she had come to him with a purpose.

Hrothgar: "Should I thank the gods for your presence, or dread the depths of Hell, woman?"

Woman: "Is it not always a delicate balance, dear Hrothgar?"

Internally chastising himself for falling prey to her charms, Hrothgar stood with a warrior's pride, yet the way she moved, draped in silken fabric, stirred something deep within him.

Hrothgar: "I will take you at your word, but it is time you reveal your name."

Woman: "You may call me Succubelle, and fear not—I am no sorceress."

At her words, Hrothgar glanced down, shaking his head as if to dispel an enchantment that was invisible to others. He understood well that the whims of those in her profession often danced on the edge of humor and danger. Yet, there was an unmistakable cunning in her simplicity that warned him of the peril he faced—witchcraft and foul magic were threats even the strongest sword could not vanquish.

Hrothgar: “What proposal do you withhold, if not for the allure of my very presence, which you so brazenly pursued into this den?”

Woman: “A proposition that a woman scorned by the thieves’ guild would share only with a man similarly cast aside.”

With that, Succubelle ceased her teasing, surrendering herself to his arms as if she were a dream made flesh. Hrothgar felt the softness of her skin against his, the intoxicating pressure of her body igniting a fire within him. Time slipped away as their bodies entwined in a passionate dance, a blend of tenderness and wild abandon. Finally, as he held her close, a wave of ecstasy washed over them both.

Hrothgar: “I am no lover of city ways, Succubelle. It is time to unveil the truth behind our fortuitous encounter.”

Woman: “Indeed, you are right. I offer you a lucrative challenge—to reclaim a heart that abandoned me like a discarded trinket!”

Hrothgar: “I do not take lives for mere coin.”

Woman: “Noble sentiments, my dear. Yet, I speak of the Heart of the Sorcerer—a precious gem to seize before my former lover can claim it. And yes, it means we tread among thieves, and he will scorn you should he discover our alliance.”

Hrothgar: “Ah, so that is why you were satisfied with but one encounter on the furs.”

Woman: “You made it rather difficult to maintain professional boundaries, though I doubt a barbarian would grasp such nuances.”

Hrothgar: “Then enlighten me with what I must know.”

With a whisper, Succubelle wove her tale into his ear, producing a vague map from the depths of her minimalist attire. Hrothgar pondered, questioned, and ultimately succumbed to her allure. At worst, he could fail to grasp the jewel, meet his end at the hands of her vengeful lover accompanied by mercenaries, or fall victim to an unforeseen trap. And yet, the thought lingered—had she orchestrated this encounter as a means to achieve her own revenge and claim that legendary gem for herself?

CHAPTER 2 - Some Kind of Middle

The garish lights and raucous celebrations faded into the distance as the Norse strode onward. He had shed his tattered tunic, moving through the night in nothing but a loincloth and high-strapped sandals. With the grace of a great tiger, his sinewy muscles rippled beneath his sun-kissed skin, a testament to his strength and agility. He had entered the sacred precincts of the city, where the temples stood resplendent in the starlight. All around him, the snowy marble pillars, golden domes, and silver arches sparkled—a testament to Zagreb's myriad enigmatic deities. Yet, he paid them little mind, understanding that the faith of such a long-established civilization was a labyrinth of complexities, having long lost its original purity amidst a tangle of doctrines and rituals. He had spent hours in the philosophers' courtyard, absorbing the fervent debates of theologians and scholars, emerging from that intellectual tempest with only one certainty: they were all a bit unhinged.

His own gods were straightforward and clear-cut. At the helm was Fenrir, a formidable deity residing on a great mountain, from whence he dispensed doom and death. It was futile to beseech Fenrir, for he was a grim and ferocious god, harboring disdain for the weak. Yet, he bestowed upon men the courage at birth and the fierce will to vanquish their foes—attributes that, in the Norse's view, were the very essence of divine purpose.

His sandaled feet glided silently over the polished pavement. No sentinels roamed these hallowed grounds, for even the most audacious thieves of the Forlorn Quarter dared not encroach upon the temples, where ominous fates had been known to befall trespassers. As he walked, he beheld the imposing silhouette of the Tower of the Warlock, its name a mystery to him. No one seemed to possess the answer. He had never witnessed true sorcery, but he had a vague notion that it resembled the warnings surrounding witches—fearsome creatures who, despite their eerie talents, relied on poison, deceit, and blades to bring about death.

The tower's shimmering spire rose frostily against the celestial tapestry. By day, it sparkled with such brilliance that few could withstand its glare; legends whispered that it was crafted from silver. Standing a hundred and fifty feet tall, its cylindrical form was a marvel, adorned with jewels that twinkled like stars in the night sky. Nestled among exotic trees in a garden elevated above the city, the tower was encircled by a formidable wall, enclosing a realm that felt both sacred and secretive. No lights illuminated the structure, and it bore no windows above the inner wall—only the high-set gems sparkled frostily, as if winking at the world below.

Thick shrubbery thrived outside the outer wall, and the Norse approached cautiously, sizing up the barrier with keen eyes. It stood tall, yet he knew he could leap and grasp its edge. From there, it would be a simple matter to swing himself over, and he had no doubt he could scale the inner wall in the same manner. Yet, a moment's hesitation gripped him as he contemplated the strange dangers rumored to lurk within.

These people were enigmatic and foreign to him, distinct from his own kind. They did not share the same blood as the more roaming Brexit Islanders, Indians, Corsicans, or Midlanders, whose sophisticated mysteries had once captivated him. The inhabitants of Romania were ancient, and from what he had observed, they harbored a darkness that sent shivers down his spine.

He pondered the ominous figure of Archmage Janus, the high priest who conjured dark destinies from his jeweled tower. The Norse felt a chill run down his spine as he recalled a tale recounted by a tipsy page at court—a tale of how Archmage Janus had faced a hostile prince with unflinching laughter, brandishing a sinister, glowing gem. In that moment, blinding rays erupted from the accursed jewel, engulfing the prince, whose desperate screams echoed before he crumbled into a withered, blackened husk, transforming into a frenzied spider until the Archmage crushed it beneath his heel.

Janus did not often descend from his tower of sorcery, and when he did, it was invariably to unleash malevolence upon a man or a nation. The king of Romania lived in a constant state of dread, fearing the Archmage more than death itself, drowning his terror in a sea of drink, for the weight of such fear was unbearable when sober. Whispers claimed the Archmage was ancient—centuries old—and that he would endure eternally, sustained by the power of his gem, known as the Heart of the Sorcerer, a name as enigmatic as the tower itself, dubbed the Warlock's Tower.

Lost in these thoughts, the Norse pressed himself against the wall. He heard measured footsteps in the garden, the unmistakable clink of steel marking the guard's patrol. Anticipation gripped him, yet silence enveloped the mysterious gardens, leaving him in a state of suspense.

Eventually, curiosity overcame his caution. With a nimble leap, he grasped the wall, hoisting himself effortlessly to the top. Lying flat on the broad coping, he peered into the expansive courtyard below. No foliage grew near him, though he spotted meticulously trimmed bushes against the inner wall. Starlight danced upon the manicured grass, and somewhere in the distance, a fountain sang softly.

With careful precision, the Norse lowered himself into the garden and drew his sword, his senses heightened by the vulnerability of the starlit night. He moved stealthily along the wall's curve, embracing the shadows until he reached the shrubbery he had previously observed. Then he darted toward it, crouching low, nearly stumbling over a crumpled form nestled at the edge of the bushes.

A swift glance in either direction revealed no immediate threat, and he leaned in for a closer look. Even in the dim glow of starlight, his keen eyes recognized the unmistakable figure of a robust man clad in the silver armor and crested helmet of the royal guard. A shield and spear lay nearby, and a brief examination confirmed the grim reality—he had been strangled.

Uneasy, the barbarian surveyed his surroundings. This soldier was undoubtedly the guard he had heard pass by moments earlier. In that fleeting interval, unseen hands had emerged from the shadows to snuff out the soldier's life.

Straining to pierce the darkness, he detected a flicker of movement among the shrubs near the wall. With silent resolve, he glided forward, gripping his sword with purpose. He moved with the stealth of a panther stalking its prey, yet the man he pursued sensed his presence. The Norse caught a fleeting glimpse of a large figure against the wall and felt a surge of relief—it was human. But before he could react, the figure spun around with a gasp of alarm, instinctively lunging forward with outstretched hands before recoiling at the sight of the Norse's blade glinting in the starlight. For a taut moment, they stood poised for action, each waiting for the other to make the next move.

"You are no soldier," the stranger finally hissed, his voice laced with disdain. "You are a thief, just like me."

“And who might you be?” the Norse inquired, his tone tinged with suspicion.

“Kaligupta of India,” came the reply, smooth and confident.

The Norse lowered his sword, curiosity igniting within him.

“I’ve heard of you. They call you the prince of thieves.”

A low, melodic laugh escaped Kaligupta, a sound that seemed to dance in the night air. He matched the Norse in height, yet his bulk was more pronounced, a testament to his indulgent lifestyle. Despite his rotund figure, an undeniable energy radiated from him, evident in the sharp glimmer of his eyes that sparkled even under the starlit sky. Barefoot and wielding a coiled length of thin, sturdy rope, knotted at regular intervals, he leaned closer. “And you, who are you?” he whispered.

“Hrothgar, a Norseman,” the other replied. “I have come to devise a way to steal Archmage Janus’ jewel, known as the Sorcerer’s Heart.”

Hrothgar felt the man’s belly tremble with laughter, but it bore no mockery.

“By Skaun Drelle, god of thieves!” Kaligupta exclaimed, his voice almost reverent. “I believed I was the only one audacious enough to make such an attempt. These locals boast of their thieving skills… what nonsense! Hrothgar, I admire your boldness. I have never embarked on an adventure with anyone before, but by Skaun Drelle, if you are willing, we shall undertake this together.”

“Then you seek the gem as well?” Hrothgar asked, intrigue piquing his interest.

“What else could I desire? My plans have been meticulously laid for months, while you, my friend, have acted on a sudden whim.”

“You killed the soldier?” Hrothgar pressed, a hint of concern in his voice.

“Naturally,” Kaligupta replied, a mischievous glint in his eye. “I slipped over the wall while he was distracted on the other side of the garden. Concealed within the bushes, when he stumbled upon me, it was child’s play to seize him from behind and choke the life from him. Most men are blind in the dark. A true thief possesses the keen sight of a cat.”

“You made one mistake,” Hrothgar stated, his voice steady.

Kaligupta's eyes sparked with indignation.

"I? A mistake? Preposterous!"

"You should have dragged the body into the bushes," Hrothgar suggested, his tone firm yet constructive.

"Said the novice to the master of the craft. They will not change the guard until after midnight. If someone were to discover the body now, they would rush to Archmage Janus, spreading the news and leaving us precious little time to escape. Should they fail to find it, however, they would continue their search, ensnaring us like rats in a trap."

"You are right," Hrothgar conceded, a newfound respect blossoming between them.

"Now, listen closely. We squander time in this futile debate. There are no guards in the inner garden—at least, no human ones. Yet there are sentinels far more lethal. Their presence has confounded me for ages, but I have finally unearthed a way to bypass them."

"What of the soldiers stationed in the lower levels of the tower?"

"Above us, the venerable Archmage Janus resides in his chambers. It is through that path that we must navigate, and I have devised a plan. We will stealthily descend from the tower's pinnacle and strike down Archmage Janus before he can unleash his vile incantations upon us. We shall attempt this audacious endeavor, for the peril of being transformed into a spider or a toad pales in comparison to the wealth and power that await us. A true thief must understand the art of risk."

"I will venture as far as any man dares," declared Hrothgar, slipping off his sandals with resolve.

"Then follow my lead." With that, Kaligupta sprang upward, grasping the wall with a grace that belied his size, seemingly gliding over the edge with effortless ease. Hrothgar followed, lying flat on the broad summit as they exchanged hushed, cautious whispers.

"I see no light," Hrothgar murmured, taking in the lower section of the tower, which appeared as a flawless, gleaming cylinder, devoid of any visible openings.

“There are cleverly concealed doors and windows,” Kaligupta replied, “but they are shut tight. The soldiers draw their breath from above.”

The garden below was a nebulous pool of shadows, where delicate bushes and low-hanging trees swayed ominously beneath the starlit sky. Hrothgar’s instincts tingled with a palpable sense of impending danger. He felt the oppressive weight of unseen eyes watching him, and a subtle scent wafted through the air, causing the fine hairs on his neck to rise, much like a hunting dog sensing an old adversary. “Stay close,” Kaligupta whispered urgently, “and remain behind me if you value your life.”

With a deft motion, the Indian produced what appeared to be a copper tube from his belt and dropped lightly to the grass by the wall. Hrothgar closely followed, sword at the ready, but Kaligupta halted him, pressing him back against the wall, tension radiating from his every pore. His gaze, like Hrothgar’s, was fixed on the shadowy underbrush just a few paces away. The bushes trembled, despite the stillness of the night. Then, two fierce eyes ignited from the darkness, joined by more glimmers, a constellation of predatory intent.

“Lions!” Hrothgar muttered, dread curling in his stomach.

“Indeed. By day, they are confined to subterranean caverns beneath the tower. That is why this garden is devoid of guards,” Kaligupta explained, counting the eyes with swift precision.

“Five visible, perhaps more lurking in the shadows. They will charge any moment…”

“Silence!” Kaligupta hissed, stepping cautiously away from the wall, his movements as deliberate as if he were navigating a field of razors. He lifted the slender tube to his lips, and low growls emanated from the shadows as the blazing eyes advanced. Hrothgar could almost feel the weight of great jaws, the lashing tails brushing against tawny flanks. The air thickened with tension, and he gripped his sword, bracing for the imminent assault. With a sudden rush, Kaligupta blew forcefully into the tube, releasing a long stream of yellowish powder that erupted into a dense green-yellow cloud, engulfing the shrubbery and obscuring the menacing eyes.

Kaligupta hurried back to the wall, and Hrothgar stared in confusion as silence enveloped the thick fog. “What is this mist?” he asked, unease creeping into his voice.

“Death!” Kaligupta replied sharply. “If the wind shifts and brings it back upon us, we must flee over the wall. But no, the air remains still, and the mist is dissipating. Wait until it has vanished completely. To inhale it is to invite death.”

Gradually, only ghostly remnants of yellowish shreds lingered in the air before they too disappeared. Kaligupta gestured for Hrothgar to advance. They crept toward the bushes, and Hrothgar gasped at the sight before him. Five great, tawny forms lay still in the shadows, their fiery eyes extinguished forever. A sickly sweet scent lingered in the atmosphere.

“They perished without a sound!” Hrothgar whispered. “Kaligupta, what was that powder?”

“It was crafted from the black lotus, whose blossoms sway in the forgotten jungles of Cathay, where only the yellow-skulled priests of Yun reside. The scent of those blossoms is lethal to anyone who breathes it in.”

Hrothgar knelt beside the massive forms, ensuring they were truly beyond harm. He shook his head, awed and terrified by the potent magic of distant lands, so foreign to the barbarian’s understanding.

“Why not use the same method against the soldiers in the tower?” he inquired.

“Because that was the last of my powder. Acquiring it was a feat that would earn me renown among thieves across the world. I pilfered it from a caravan bound for Egypt, lifting it from the coils of the great serpent that guarded it without waking it. But come, in the name of Skaun Drelle! Are we to squander the night in idle chatter?”

They slipped through the underbrush toward the radiant base of the tower, and with a gesture urging silence, Kaligupta unfurled a knotted cord, one end adorned with a sturdy steel hook. Hrothgar understood the plan without needing further explanation as the Indian gripped the line just below the hook and began to swing it above his head. Hrothgar pressed his ear against the smooth wall, listening intently, but could discern nothing. Clearly, the soldiers within remained oblivious to their presence, which had made less noise than the gentle breeze rustling through the trees.

Yet an unsettling nervousness clung to the barbarian, perhaps a remnant of the lion's scent that lingered in the air.

With a fluid motion, Kaligupta launched the line, the hook arcing upward and disappearing over the jeweled rim. It seemed to catch securely, as cautious tugs and then powerful pulls yielded no sign of slipping.

"Fortune favors us," Kaligupta murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

Suddenly, it was Hrothgar's primal instinct that propelled him into action, for death approached without a sound. In an instant, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a massive, tawny shape rising against the starlit sky, poised to deliver a fatal blow. No civilized man could have reacted with the swiftness that surged through the barbarian. His sword flashed, reflecting the starlight, as he struck with every ounce of desperation and strength, and man and beast fell in a brutal dance of fate.

Cursing under his breath, Kaligupta hurried to the fallen forms, noting Hrothgar's struggle to free himself from the weight now lying limply atop him. A quick glance revealed to the startled Indian that the lion was dead, its skull cleaved in two. With determination, he grasped the carcass, helping Hrothgar push it aside as the Norseman rose, still gripping his bloodied sword.

"Are you injured, my friend?" Kaligupta gasped, still reeling from the astonishing rapidity of their encounter.

"No, by Fenrir!" the barbarian exclaimed, his voice a mix of astonishment and relief. "That was the closest brush with death I've experienced in a life that has never shied away from peril. Why did that accursed beast charge without a roar?"

"All is peculiar in this garden," Kaligupta replied, his tone contemplative. "The lions strike without sound, as do other forms of demise. Yet, come, though the act of slaying was hushed, the soldiers could have heard it had they not been lulled into slumber or intoxication. That beast must have been lurking elsewhere in the garden, evading the fate that befell the flowers. Surely, there are no more lurking about. We must ascend this cord; there's no need to question a Norseman's ability."

"If it can support my weight," Hrothgar grunted, wiping his sword clean against the grass.

“It will bear three times my own,” Kaligupta affirmed confidently. “I fashioned it from the tresses of the deceased, gathered from their tombs at midnight, and steeped it in the venomous nectar of the upas tree to enhance its strength. I will ascend first; follow closely behind me.”

With a firm grip on the rope, the Indian adeptly wrapped a knee around it and began his ascent, moving with the grace of a feline, defying the bulk he bore. The Norseman followed suit. The cord swayed and twisted, yet they pressed on, both seasoned climbers who had faced greater challenges before. Above them, the jeweled rim sparkled, jutting out from the vertical expanse, a factor that eased their climb.

They ascended in silence, the city lights spreading further beneath them as they climbed, the stars above gradually obscured by the brilliance of the gems adorning the rim. Kaligupta reached up, grasping the rim itself, and pulled himself over.

Hrothgar paused at the edge, captivated by the frosty jewels that dazzled his gaze: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, turquoises, and moonstones, all set thickly like stars against a shimmering silver backdrop. From a distance, their hues had merged into a pulsing white glare, but now, up close, they shimmered with a million rainbow shades, entrancing him with their brilliance.

“There lies a fortune beyond imagining, Kaligupta,” he whispered, but the Indian’s impatience cut through his reverie. “Hurry! If we secure the Heart, these treasures, and all else, shall belong to us.”

Hrothgar climbed over the sparkling rim, discovering that the tower’s flat top was several feet below the gem-studded ledge. It was composed of a dark blue substance, speckled with gold that caught the starlight, creating the illusion of a vast sapphire dusted with shining gold. Before them, a chamber appeared, constructed atop the roof, made of the same silvery material as the tower’s walls. It was adorned with intricate designs of smaller gems, its solitary door crafted of gold, its surface resembling scales, crusted with jewels that glimmered like ice.

Hrothgar cast a glance at the pulsing sea of lights below and then turned to Kaligupta, who was drawing up his cord and coiling it. The Indian indicated where the hook had caught—a mere fraction of an inch had sunk beneath a blazing jewel on the inner side of the rim.

“Luck is with us once more,” he murmured. “One might think our combined weight would have dislodged that stone. Follow me; the true perils of this venture begin now. We have entered the serpent’s lair, and we are oblivious to its hidden dangers.”

Like tigers stalking their prey, they crept across the darkly gleaming floor and paused before the sparkling door. With a deft and cautious hand, Kaligupta tested it. It yielded without resistance, and the companions peered inside, hearts racing in anticipation. Over Kaligupta’s shoulder, Hrothgar caught a glimpse of a glittering chamber, its walls, ceiling, and floor encrusted with large white jewels that illuminated the space, the only source of light. It appeared devoid of life.

“Before we sever our last means of retreat,” Kaligupta hissed, “go to the rim and scan the surroundings. If you observe any soldiers stirring in the gardens or anything amiss, return and inform me. I will remain here, within this chamber.”

Hrothgar found little reason in this request, a flicker of suspicion igniting in his cautious heart, yet he complied with Kaligupta’s directive. As he turned away, the Indian slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

Hrothgar circled the tower’s rim, returning to his starting point without witnessing any suspicious movement in the gently swaying sea of leaves below. He turned toward the door, and suddenly, a strangled cry echoed from within the chamber.

The Norseman leaped forward, electrified. The gleaming floor swung open, revealing Kaligupta framed in the cold blaze behind him. He swayed, lips parted, but only a dry rattle escaped his throat. Grasping the golden door for support, he lurched onto the roof, then fell, clutching at his throat. The door swung shut behind him.

Hrothgar, crouching like a panther at bay, saw nothing within the room beyond the stricken Indian during the brief moment the door was ajar, save for a fleeting shadow that danced across the gleaming surface. Nothing followed Kaligupta onto the roof, and Hrothgar leaned over the fallen man.

The Indian gazed up with dilated, glazing eyes that held a profound bewilderment. His hands clawed at his throat, lips gurgling in a desperate struggle for breath, until suddenly, he stiffened, and the astonished Norseman recognized that he was dead. It struck Hrothgar with a chilling realization that Kaligupta had perished without comprehending the nature of the death that had claimed him. Bewildered, he glared at the enigmatic golden door. In that glittering chamber, death had descended upon the prince of thieves as swiftly and mysteriously as he had dealt lethal fate to the lions lurking in the gardens below.

With a careful touch, the barbarian explored the man's exposed form, searching for signs of injury. The only evidence of violence lay between his shoulders, high at the nape of his neck—three small punctures that resembled the marks left by nails driven deep into flesh before being cruelly withdrawn. The edges of these wounds were a sinister black, and an unpleasant odor of decay lingered in the air. Poisoned darts? Hrothgar mused, yet if that were true, the deadly projectiles should still be embedded in the flesh.

Stealthily, he approached the golden door, pushing it open with a firm hand, and peered into the chamber beyond. It stood empty, illuminated by the cold, pulsating glow of countless jewels. At the center of the ceiling, a peculiar design caught his eye: an eight-sided black pattern, within which four gems flickered with a fiery red light, starkly contrasting the white brilliance of the surrounding jewels. Opposite him loomed another door, similar to the one he had just entered, yet devoid of the intricate scale carvings. Was it from that threshold that death had emerged? Having claimed its victim, had it retreated just as silently?

As he closed the door behind him, the Norseman stepped cautiously into the chamber. His bare feet made no sound against the crystal floor. The room was devoid of chairs or tables, save for a few silken couches embroidered with gold and adorned with enigmatic serpentine motifs, alongside several silver-bound mahogany chests. Some were locked with heavy golden clasps, while others lay open, their carved lids thrown back, revealing a chaotic bounty of jewels that dazzled Hrothgar's astonished gaze. He muttered a curse under his breath; he had stumbled upon more wealth that night than he had ever dared to imagine existed, and the thought of the jewel he sought made him dizzy with anticipation.

Now in the heart of the room, he crouched low, head extended cautiously and sword at the ready, when, without warning, death struck again. A shadow swept across the gleaming floor, his only warning, and his instinctive leap to the side was what saved his life. In that fleeting moment, he caught a glimpse of a monstrous creature—an abominable black horror—swinging past him, its frothing fangs clashing together, while something splattered against his bare shoulder, searing like drops of liquid hellfire. He sprang back, sword raised, just in time to see the beast crash to the floor, wheel around, and scuttle towards him with terrifying swiftness. A gigantic black spider, a creature most men only encounter in their darkest nightmares.

As large as a pig, its thick, hairy legs propelled its grotesque body forward at an alarming pace. Four eyes, glinting with a malicious intelligence, locked onto him, while venom dripped from its fangs—venom that Hrothgar knew, from the burning sensation on his shoulder, was laden with swift death. This was the very killer that had descended from its perch in the ceiling, dropping down upon Kaligupta's neck. How foolish they had been not to anticipate that the upper chambers could be just as perilous as the lower!

In that brief moment, thoughts raced through Hrothgar's mind as the monster charged. He leaped high, narrowly escaping its grasp as it passed beneath him. It turned and charged again, but this time he sidestepped with feline agility, retaliating with a swift strike. His sword sliced through one of its hairy legs, and he barely evaded its fierce counterattack, the fangs clicking in a menacing rhythm. But the creature did not press its advantage. Instead, it retreated, racing up the wall to the ceiling, pausing for a heartbeat to glare down at him with its malevolent red eyes. Then, with no warning, it launched itself into the air, trailing a strand of viscous gray silk.

Hrothgar stepped back, narrowly avoiding the hurtling body, then ducked just in time to escape the snare of the flying web rope. Understanding the creature's intent, he dashed toward the door, but it was faster. A sticky strand shot across the entrance, binding him in place. He dared not cut it with his sword, knowing the substance would cling to the blade, and before he could shake it free, the fiend would sink its fangs into his back.

Thus began a desperate duel, the cunning and agility of man pitted against the fiendish speed and craft of the giant spider. No longer did it scuttle directly at him; instead, it raced along the ceiling and walls, seeking to ensnare him within its long, sticky loops of gray web, flung with a devilish precision.

These strands were thick as rope, and Hrothgar knew that once they coiled around him, even his desperate strength would be insufficient to free himself before the monster struck.

The chamber transformed into a silent arena, where the only sounds were the quickened breaths of the man, the soft scuff of his feet against the shining floor, and the eerie rattle of the creature's fangs. Coils of gray strands lay strewn across the floor, looped along the walls, draping over jewel-laden chests and silken couches, and hanging like dark festoons from the jeweled ceiling. Hrothgar's sharp reflexes had thus far kept him untouched, though the sticky loops had grazed his skin with unnerving proximity. He knew he could not evade them forever; he had to remain vigilant, watching both the strands swinging from above and the coils on the ground lest he trip. Sooner or later, a loop would ensnare him, and he would find himself wrapped like a cocoon, utterly at the mercy of the monster.

The spider scuttled across the chamber floor, its gray thread trailing behind like a sinister banner. Hrothgar sprang into the air, soaring over a couch with remarkable agility. In a swift motion, the creature ascended the wall, its strand springing from the ground like a living entity, ensnaring the Norseman's ankle with a tenacious grip. As he fell, he caught himself on his hands, frantically tugging at the web that constricted him like a pliant vise or the coiling embrace of a python. The monstrous arachnid descended the wall with alarming speed, intent on completing its capture. Driven by desperation, Hrothgar seized a jewel chest and hurled it with all his might. The monster was taken by surprise; the massive projectile collided amidst the writhing black legs, crashing against the wall with a sickening thud. Blood and greenish slime erupted, and the shattered remnants of the chest tumbled to the ground, jewels spilling forth in a vibrant cascade. The crushed body of the spider lay among the glittering chaos, its hairy legs twitching aimlessly, and its fading eyes glimmered among the radiant gems.

Hrothgar scanned the surroundings, relieved that no further horrors emerged. Resolute, he set to work freeing himself from the web's clutches. The substance clung stubbornly to his ankle and hands, but after a fierce struggle, he finally broke free. Grasping his sword, he navigated the tangled gray strands toward the inner door. The unknown awaited him beyond, but the Norseman's blood surged with a fierce determination. Having journeyed so far and faced myriad dangers, he was resolute in pursuing the grim conclusion of this adventure, whatever it may hold. He sensed that the jewel he sought was not among the careless scatter of treasures glimmering in the chamber.

As he stripped away the loops ensnaring the inner door, he discovered, much to his relief, that it, like the previous one, was not locked. A thought crossed his mind—were the soldiers below still oblivious to his presence? He was high above them, and if the tales were true, they had grown accustomed to the strange noises emanating from the tower above...echoes of sinister happenings and cries of anguish.

The name of Archmage Janus lingered in his thoughts, unsettling him as he opened the golden door. Beyond lay a flight of silver steps spiraling downward, dimly illuminated by an unknown source. He descended quietly, his sword gripped tightly in his hand. Silence enveloped him until he reached an ivory door adorned with bloodstones. He paused to listen, but only the faintest wisps of smoke curled from beneath the door, carrying an exotic scent unfamiliar to the Norseman. Below him, the silver staircase twisted into the obscurity, while above, the shadowy well offered no sound, leaving him with an eerie conviction that he was alone in a tower inhabited solely by ghosts and phantoms.

CHAPTER 3 - The Spiritual Journey Towards The End

With a measured breath, he pressed against the ivory door, which yielded silently to his touch. On the shimmering threshold, Hrothgar stood, a vigilant wolf in an alien landscape, poised to either defend himself or retreat at a moment's notice. Before him lay a vast chamber, its domed ceiling glimmering like gold, while the walls, adorned in rich green jade, rose majestically around him. The ivory floor, partly obscured by thick, luxurious rugs, added to the surreal ambiance. Wisps of smoke and the heady fragrance of incense wafted from a brazier perched upon a golden tripod. Behind it, an idol reclined on a marble couch, an unsettling sight that seized Hrothgar's attention. The figure bore the body of a man—naked and eerily green—but its head was a grotesque manifestation of nightmare and madness, devoid of any human semblance. Hrothgar's gaze lingered in disbelief, captivated by the sight of the idol's eyes, closed as though in a deep slumber.

If this was indeed the god of Archmage Janus, then where might the Sorcerer's Heart be concealed, if not within this very idol?

As Hrothgar stepped forward, his gaze locked onto the unmoving figure, the unthinkable happened—the eyes of the idol snapped open! The Norse warrior froze, his heart pounding in his chest. This was no illusion; he faced a living, breathing enigma, and he found himself ensnared within its domain.

The fact that he did not erupt into a frenzy of violence spoke volumes of his horror, a paralyzing dread that held him captive in place. A man of civilization might have sought refuge in the thought of madness, but doubt never entered Hrothgar's mind. He understood, with an unsettling clarity, that he was in the presence of a demon from the Elder World, and this realization stripped him of all faculties save for the power of sight.

The trunk of the abomination stirred, questing the air with a blind, unseeing gaze. In that moment, Hrothgar's frozen nerves began to thaw, compelling him to retreat silently towards the door. Yet, the creature sensed his movement.

Its sensitive trunk extended toward him, and Hrothgar's horror seized him anew when the being spoke, its voice a strange, stammering echo that betrayed no variation in tone or pitch. He understood that these jaws were never designed for the articulation of human speech.

"Who is here? Have you come to torment me once more, Archmage Janus? Will this suffering never cease? Oh, Yag-Kosha, is there no end to my torment?"

Tears streamed from the sightless eyes, and Hrothgar's gaze was drawn to the limbs sprawled upon the marble couch. In that moment, he realized the creature had no intention of attacking him. The marks of torture were etched into its form, and despite his own rugged spirit, he stood transfixed by the tragic deformities that had once been limbs as graceful as his own. An overwhelming wave of pity washed over him, displacing any remnants of fear or revulsion. Though he could not comprehend the full extent of this creature's existence, the evidence of its suffering was so profound and heart-wrenching that a deep, inexplicable sadness enveloped him. He felt as though he were bearing the weight of a cosmic tragedy, and shame coursed through him as if he were shouldering the guilt of an entire race.

"I am not Archmage Janus," he declared, a hint of defiance in his voice. "I am merely a thief, and I bear no intention of bringing you harm."

"Approach, so that I might feel your presence," the creature hesitated, its voice trembling. Hrothgar stepped forward, unafraid, his sword forgotten at his side. A sensitive trunk extended, exploring his face and shoulders, as a blind man would, its touch as gentle as a lover's caress.

"You are not of Archmage Janus's kind," the creature sighed, a hint of recognition in its tone.

“The clean, fierce essence of the Northlands is unmistakable. I have known your people long ago, when another world, adorned with jeweled spires, reached for the stars. There is blood upon your hands.”

“A spider in the chamber above and a lion in the garden,” Hrothgar muttered, the weight of the night heavy upon him.

“You have taken a life this night,” the creature replied. “And I sense the shadow of death in the tower above. I can feel it.”

“Aye,” Hrothgar acknowledged grimly. “The prince of all thieves lies dead, a victim of an arachnid assassin’s bite.”

“So it is!” The creature’s voice rose in a haunting chant. “A killing in the tavern and another on the road. I know, I feel it. And the third will weave a magic beyond even Archmage Janus’s wildest dreams. Oh, magic of redemption, green gods of Yag!”

Tears streamed down the creature’s face as it rocked in a tumult of emotions, leaving Hrothgar bewildered by the sight.

Then, as if the storm within had calmed, the soft, sightless eyes turned toward him, and the trunk beckoned him closer.

“Listen, oh man,” the creature implored, its voice trembling with vulnerability. "I must seem foul and monstrous to you, am I not? But do not answer; I already know. Were I to see you, you would appear equally strange to me. There exist myriad worlds beyond this one, and life assumes countless forms. I am neither god nor demon, but flesh and blood, akin to yourself, though our essences diverge and our shapes are cast in different molds.

"I am ancient, oh man of the Viking lands. Long, long ago, I arrived on this planet with others from my realm, the verdant world of Shugga-Ya, which dances eternally at the edge of this universe. We soared through the cosmos on mighty wings, quicker than light, having fought against the malevolent kings of old, only to be vanquished and exiled. Our return was forever barred, for here on Earth, our wings withered from our shoulders. We became reclusive, battling the strange and fearsome beings that roamed the Earth, earning our reputation as formidable and, thus, left untroubled in the shadowy jungles of the East, our chosen sanctuary.

"We witnessed the evolution of mankind—from ape to civilization—observing as they stumbled before the onslaught of the heathen Atlanteans, Picts, and Lemurians. We watched as the oceans rose, swallowing Atlantis and Lemuria, the strongholds of civilization, and saw the remnants of these once-great cultures descend into ruin, locked in endless conflict. We observed the Picts devolving into savage brutality and the Atlanteans regressing into primal existence. New waves of savagery drifted southward from the Arctic Circle, forging a new civilization, new kingdoms.

"All this we beheld, neither aiding nor hindering the relentless cosmic order, until one by one, we faded away. We of Shugga-Ya are not immortal, though our lifespans echo the ages of planets and constellations. In time, I remained alone, reminiscing amidst the crumbling temples of jungle-enshrouded Cathay, revered as a deity by an ancient yellow-skinned race. Then, Archmage Janus arrived, steeped in the dark arts that had been passed down through the annals of barbarism, since before Atlantis succumbed to the depths.

"He first sat at my feet, eager to learn from my wisdom. Yet, he was not content with the light of knowledge I offered; he craved the dark lore to bend kings to his will and pursue his fiendish ambitions unscathed. I refused to share the secrets of black magic that I had unearthed, not by my own desire, but through the ages.

"Yet, his cunning surpassed my expectations. With guile gleaned from the shadowy tombs of Egypt, he ensnared me into revealing a secret I had sworn to keep. Turning my own power against me, he enslaved me. Oh, gods of Shugga-Ya, the bitterness of my existence has been profound since that fateful moment!

“He dragged me from the lost jungles of Cathay, where the gray apes danced to the melodies of ancient priests, and offerings of fruit and wine adorned my shattered altars. No longer was I a deity to the gentle jungle folk; I was reduced to a slave of a devil clad in human form.”

Once more, tears welled from the creature’s unseeing eyes.

"He confined me within this tower, which I was compelled to construct for him in a single night. Through fire and torment, he subjugated me, employing unearthly tortures that you cannot fathom. In my agony, I would have long ago sought to end my own life, had I been able. Yet he kept me alive—mangled, blinded, broken to fulfill his vile commands.

For three centuries, I have obeyed his every whim from this marble couch, tarnishing my soul with cosmic sins and staining my wisdom with crimes, for I had no other choice. Yet, not all of my ancient knowledge has he wrested from me, and my final gift shall be the sorcery of the Blood and the Jewel.

“I sense that the end of time approaches. You are the hand of Fate. I beseech you, take the gem that rests upon yonder altar.”

Hrothgar turned to the gold and ivory altar indicated, lifting a magnificent round jewel, as clear as crimson crystal, instantly recognizing it as the Heart of the Sorcerer.

"Now for the great magic, the powerful magic, unlike anything this Earth has witnessed before, and shall not witness again for countless millennia. By my lifeblood, I conjure it, by blood born upon the green breast of Shugga-Ya, suspended in the vast blue expanse of Space.

“Take your sword, man, and cut out my heart, then squeeze it so that my blood flows over the red stone. Descend these stairs and enter the ebony chamber where Archmage Janus languishes in his lotus dreams of malevolence. Speak his name, and he will awaken. Lay this gem before him, and declare, ‘Shugga-Ya-Shalosh offers you a final gift and a last enchantment.’ Then, flee from the tower swiftly; fear not, for your path shall be illuminated. The life of man differs from that of Shugga-Ya, nor does human death mirror the death of Shugga-Ya. Grant me release from this cage of broken, blind flesh, and I shall once again be Yogah of Shugga-Ya—crowned by dawn, radiant, with wings to soar, feet to dance, eyes to behold, and hands to break free.”

With a hesitant step, Hrothgar approached, and Shugga-Ya-Shalosh, or Yogah, as if attuned to his uncertainty, gestured to indicate where his strike should land. Gritting his teeth, Hrothgar plunged the sword deep into the creature. Blood cascaded over the blade and his hand, and the beast convulsed before lying still, an unsettling silence enveloping the chamber.

Convinced that life had ebbed away—at least the life he had known—Hrothgar set to work on the grim task before him, quickly extracting what he believed to be the heart of this enigmatic being, though it appeared remarkably different from any he had ever encountered. Holding the pulsating organ above the radiant jewel, he pressed it firmly, and a shower of blood fell upon the stone. To his astonishment, the liquid did not slide off; instead, it seeped into the gem, much like water being absorbed by a sponge.

With the jewel cradled delicately in his hands, he exited the fantastical chamber and found himself before the silver steps. He did not glance back, instinctively sensing that some profound transformation was occurring within the body upon the marble couch, a change too sacred to be witnessed by mortal eyes.

Closing the ivory door behind him, he descended the silver steps without a moment's hesitation, the instructions given to him echoing in his mind. He paused at an ebony door, adorned with a grinning silver skull, and pushed it open. Before him lay a chamber of ebony and jet, where a tall, lean figure reclined upon a black silken couch. Archmage Janus, the priest and sorcerer, was sprawled there, his eyes wide and dilated from the fumes of the yellow lotus, staring into the unfathomable depths of night.

"Archmage Janus!" Hrothgar declared, his voice resonating with authority, like a judge delivering a verdict. "Awaken!"

In an instant, the priest's eyes sharpened, turning cold and predatory, reminiscent of a vulture's gaze. The tall, silken-clad form rose, towering gauntly above the Norseman.

"Wretch!" he hissed, his voice slithering like a serpent. "What do you seek here?"

Hrothgar placed the jewel upon the ebony table.

"He who sent this gem commanded me to convey, 'Shugga-Ya-Shalosh offers you a final gift and a last enchantment.'"

Archmage Janus recoiled, his dark features paling. The jewel, once crystal-clear, now pulsed with murky depths, waves of shifting color dancing across its smooth surface. Drawn by an unseen force, Janus leaned over the table, gripping the gem as if it were a lodestone, pulling at the very essence of his soul. Hrothgar blinked, bewildered; the towering figure of the Archmage now appeared diminutive, his head barely reaching Hrothgar's shoulder. Doubt crept into the Norseman's mind, and with a jolt, he recognized the truth: the priest was being drained of his life essence, a magic restoring a balance far beyond his comprehension.

With a sense of detached horror, Hrothgar observed, as though he were a spectator at a tragic play. The overwhelming sense of unreality enveloped him, leaving him questioning his own identity, aware only that he was witnessing forces of magic that transcended his understanding.

Now, Archmage Janus appeared aged and tormented, vitality sapped, yet an acute awareness of his inescapable fate lingered in his gaze. Drawn toward the jewel, he seemed destined to become but a wisp of dust, evaporating into the ether.

Turning away, Hrothgar fled from the chamber, racing down the silver stairs, so astonished that it did not occur to him to escape by the path he had entered. He dashed through the winding, shadowy silver well and emerged into a vast chamber at the foot of the gleaming stairs. There he paused, momentarily stunned, realizing he had entered the room of soldiers. Their silver corselets gleamed dully, and jeweled sword hilts lay forgotten. They slumped at the banquet table, their dusky plumes drooping over helmeted heads, surrounded by dice and fallen goblets on the wine-stained lapis-lazuli floor. A chilling certainty washed over him: they were dead. The promise had been fulfilled, whether by sorcery, magic, or the ominous shadow of great green wings that had stilled their revelry; Hrothgar could not discern, but his path was now illuminated. A silver door stood open, framed in the soft light of dawn.

Into the lush, waving green gardens stepped the Norseman, and as the dawn wind caressed him with the cool fragrance of abundant growth, he stirred, as if awakening from a vivid dream. Turning back, he gazed uncertainly at the enigmatic tower he had just left. Had he been bewitched, ensnared in an enchantment? Had the events unfolded as they appeared? As he looked upon the gleaming tower, it swayed against the crimson dawn, its jewel-crusted rim sparkling in the burgeoning light, before shattering into brilliant shards.

THE END

POST SKRIPTUM

So, where is the sexy witch? After a thorough contemplation, anyway, I decided that I do not call it sexy when anyone tortures retirement-age elders, so I spared myself the work it takes to rewrite Archmage Janus into a female and do another grammar check due to it. Also, a trans-style Dr. Frank'N'Furter copycat would work for me, but the tragic sickness of Tim Curry weighed too heavily on my heart to choose that.

Last, but not least: Being a Taffer about it crossed my mind (Thief - Deadly Shadows or Thief 4, anyone?), but rewriting the encounters in the second chapter is another wasted & unpaid effort, as the expired copyright frees me from it being mandatory.

Proofreading software applied: Grammarly (more than 110 corrections, on REH and myself)

The Usual: Links for more by the author

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